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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000623

SIPDIS

NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/GAVITO

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: CIVIL SOCIETY DOUBTS ELECTORAL REFORM LAW
WILL PROGRESS IN PARLIAMENT

REF: BEIRUT 00614

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sision for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) Embassy Beirut's civil society partners on electoral reform agreed that the introduction of the Boutros draft law into parliament on March 8 was an important move, but not necessarily a meaningful one. March 8 MP Ghassan Mukhaiber publicly stated that his introduction of the bill had not been coordinated or supported by the March 8 political block. The bill's cosponsor, independent (and sometimes pro-March 14) MP Ghassan Tueni, similarly does not represent or have great influence over the senior March 14 leadership. Civil society contacts speculate that the draft bill will become another pawn in the current political stalemate and that this "gamesmanship" will distract attention away from the bill's important reforms. End Summary.

"Parliament Will Only Take This So Far"

12. (C) On March 6, Special Assistant convened the monthly meeting of USG-funded actors currently working on electoral reform in Lebanon. Representatives attended from the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), the Lebanese Transparency Association (LTA), the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS) and the Civil Campaign for Electoral Reform (CCER).

13. (C) Although Mukhaiber had announced his general intention to submit the draft law at a public event sponsored by IFES on April 30, neither Mukhaiber nor Tueni consulted with Lebanese civil society members to "strategize" on this public move. CCER lamented the fact that they were caught a bit by surprise on March 5 and would have liked to organize some press coverage to support the initiative. In fact, CCER is now trying to arrange appointments with both MP's to offer their endorsement of the draft law.

14. (C) Osama Safa, the LCPS Director, said that this was an important move as it "blows the dust off the Boutros draft law file and puts it back in motion. At least there is now something solid within the parliament to be discussed, added to, amended, etc. However, it is much too early to claim this as a success for the electoral reform movement." According to Safa, "The two MPs should be proud of themselves, but the submission of the draft law is more a sign of their personal commitment to electoral reform than any large-scale movement towards compromise or agreement from

the political parties. And we all know that, in the end, nothing can happen until a president is elected and the parliament reconvenes."

Political Gamesmanship May Take Center Stage

15. (C) Safa and others were also extremely suspicious about Speaker Berri's role in this latest development. After the bill was introduced, Berri moved with uncharacteristic swiftness to transfer the bill to the Justice and Administration Committee for consideration. The committee's chair, Future Movement MP Robert Ghanem, is now expected to call a hearing to consider the draft law. If he fails to do so, March 14th will be seen as obstructing the democratic dialogue on electoral reform, at least for a few local news cycles. (Note: Ghanem told us on March 6 that now is not the time to consider electoral reform as the focus should be on electing a president. Reftel. End Note.) Mukhaiber also commented to PolOff on March 5 that "civil society reform is important, but it is more important for Washington to know that being a member of the opposition doesn't make you pro-Iranian or pro-Syrian." This statement also implies that the introduction of the draft law is part of a larger political and public relations strategy.

16. (C) Safa thinks Berri has neatly tossed the ball back into March 14th's court and he worries about their ability to respond effectively. "It also places civil society in a tight position because we will be expected to push publicly for formal parliamentary committee consideration of the bill." They will also ask that the committee open its door

BEIRUT 00000623 002 OF 002

to public observers -- again, this matter is at the discretion of Robert Ghanem as the chair. (Note: Mukhaiber said that he would like to have IFES provide technical assistance to the committee, but Mukhaiber is not a member of the committee and has no say in the matter. End Note.)

17. (C) Civil society members were also concerned because the pendulum seems to have swung back towards consideration of all of the Boutros reform measures as a whole. As a strategy, civil society members had recently decided to focus on the measures individually, starting with non-controversial measures such as polling station access for physically challenged voters and gradually working their way towards consideration of controversial measures, such as electoral redistricting. This consideration of Boutros as a whole unit (all or nothing) may also be part of the political gamesmanship and may draw attention away from the actual measures included which would bring Lebanon in line with international electoral standards.

18. (C) Safa suggested that a second track be pursued directly with PM Siniora and the cabinet. "They seem to be in 'action mode' after the return of Saad Hariri, so let's ask them to show some progress on this issue too." Safa said that the Cabinet "could call Berri's bluff" and submit some legal reforms and demand that he call parliament to vote upon them. (Note: The Cabinet has not typically done this since the November 2006 closure of parliament. End Note.) All agreed that it was extremely unlikely that Siniora would take this on, but the civil society contacts want to keep March 14 aware that this is still an option available to them.

Comment

19. (C) Civil society members are energized by the recent high-level attention that electoral reform has been receiving. However, they continue to feel that political leaders keep them on the sidelines during the most important discussions. CCER and others will be requesting meetings in the next few weeks with the Prime Minister, cabinet members, parliamentarians, and political leaders. They stand ready to

speak at the March 14th "workshop" on electoral reform, which has still not been scheduled by the March 14 Secretariat. This group has tremendous technical expertise and legitimacy among the Lebanese citizens which is not being utilized effectively by March 14 political leaders. End Comment.
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